

Through snow, rain and grand piano legs

by HAZEL ALLAN
Citizen Staff Reporter

Climbing ladders, crawling into cupboards, scrambling up poles and digging through snow drifts are all in a day's work for Barry Williams.

He is one of 65 installer-repairmen working for B.C. Tel. His day begins at 8:30 a.m. when he heads into the main office on Ferry Avenue and picks up his orders.

The orders are prepared by a dispatcher, who has planned the order and repair calls a month in advance.

"Of course, hold-ups do occur," said Barry. "Someone is away sick and his workload has to be shared, an office is destroyed by fire and needs new phone lines installed immediately jobs take longer than planned and so on."

He checks his orders, makes sure the equipment he needs is in his truck and sets off on his first call.

An office damaged by fire is anxious to relocate as soon as possible. Telephone lines have been installed during the weekend and Barry's job is to install telex lines for CN telex service.

Letting himself into the building with a special key, he enters the B.C. Tel cable room in the basement. There he connects a cable pair to one leading to the third floor office. This in turn is divided into segments, with the larger cable going underground to the B.C. Tel Sixth Avenue office.

The telephone company leases cable pairs to outside companies, such as CN for their telex service, Q-music, alarm circuits which make a building burglar-proof, and data circuits.

"A business that has a direct line to a central computer in Vancouver will lease the cables from us. We also provide broadcast loops when radio stations want to transmit live from an arena or business," said Barry.

Having connected the cables, he goes upstairs to the office and phones the test desk and B.C. Tel and asks them to check the line and make sure it's not wet, corroded or shorted out.

Once the test has been done and the order is completed Barry heads towards his truck and the next job. At the front and rear of the van he placed two orange safety cones when he parked. He now collects them and stows them away before starting up.

"This is make sure that no kids are playing behind the truck where we can't see them or that they haven't left a bike leaning up against the truck. Mind you, you'd be surprised how many little kids walk off with the cones," he said.

The next order is a new installation. The house has just been completed and it is moving day for the new owners. Barry checks with the customer that his order is correct. "Often orders made by a customer don't coincide with what they actually want," he said.

"I will explain the pros and cons of having a telephone in a particular place and then go ahead and install it exactly where he wants."

All new B.C. Tel cables run underground from the central office to a distribution box located in every neighborhood. They are not always easy to locate.

This was a new box and after cruising around looking for it without success, Barry phoned the office and got directions. It was difficult to find and he had visions of having to dig it out from under an eight-foot snow-drift. Luckily, it was above the snow bank, but Barry still had to walk through knee deep snow to reach it.

"Winter really slows my job down," he said. "The snow makes driving slower, it's difficult to work outside in the cold, and everything takes much longer."

He connects the cable pair at the box — checks with the test desk and returns to the house to install the wiring. First he attaches a protector to the outside cable "so that in case of lightning or a sudden surge of power, the phone won't be blown off the wall."

He runs the wiring along walls, drills holes in the basement ceiling so as to run the wires upstairs and is careful to replace anything he's used, such as a chair to stand on. When he has completed the job he phones the test desk, the line is tested and the order checked off.

Sometimes mistakes occur and when they do, B.C. Tel reimburses the customer.

"One chap was drilling up from the basement and could not think why it took so long and then discovered he'd drilled right up the leg of a grand piano. Another guy drilled through a wall only to

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Repairman Williams checks out a telephone jack.

discover he'd drilled through a chest of drawers full of underwear."

It costs \$300 each year to install, maintain and improve service for each telephone in the Prince George District. Last year 13,500 new telephones were installed in the district, which stretches west to Burns Lake, east to Valemont, north to Mackenzie and south to Quesnel.

Prince George alone has 35,000 phones.

To become an installer-repairman you must have Grade 12 and an aptitude for mechanics and electronics.

"Once accepted, you go on a 120-day training course divided into three sections — basic installation, intermediate installation and

trouble-shooting repair work," said Barry.

B.C. Tel provides safety and defensive driving courses and safety lessons are held every month, including industrial first aid, immediate survival and poison control.

Barry first worked for B.C. Tel during his summer holidays and after he finished school he applied for a job as installer-repairman.

"I enjoy being my own boss and working on my own and yet still being able to meet people. I like repair work the

best because it is more challenging — it's harder to repair a phone than install one."

After lunch Barry heads out to an older subdivision to install a new phone and put in a new jack. Careful to remove his boots before going in the house, Barry again double checks the order and then crawls under a shelf to change the jack and carry out the new installation. This is an old neighborhood and the wires come into the house from the pole on the street rather than underground.

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In order to check the wires Barry straps hooks around his ankles and a climbing rope around his waist and nimbly climbs the pole.

"I feel safer up here with hooks than I do climbing a ladder," he shouts.

"Some people don't make it as installation-repairmen because of the pole-climbing, but I don't mind it. Although with the distribution boxes and the underground cables there are less and less poles to climb."

Barry has to install telephones in trailers occasionally and this can be a tricky job.

"A new trailer is no problem because it often doesn't have the skirting. But some of the old ones are difficult to get underneath, and very often garbage is piled up under the trailer and it isn't very pleasant."

Delays can occur and when a new subscriber has been waiting at home all day for the installer-repairman, the switchboard operators at the downtown office often receive irate calls.

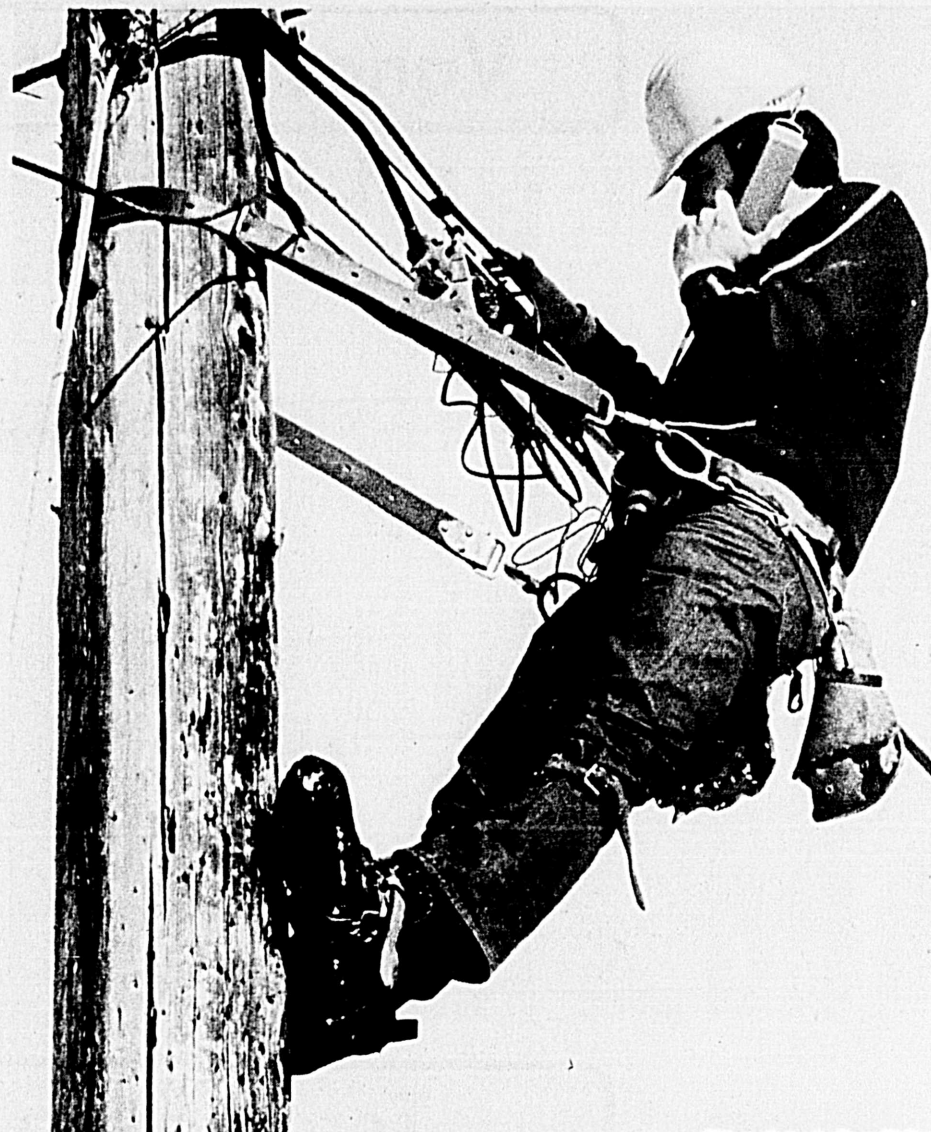
"But when I arrive and explain what has happened, the customer usually is very understanding and pleasant. You just cannot predict how long a job will take and emergencies do crop up which throw your schedule off."

Barry hasn't had any public relations training, but he goes out of his way to explain how the telephones work, what services are available, and how the customer can cut costs by collecting new telephone sets from Phone Mart.

The rest of the afternoon Barry's orders are to trouble shoot repair jobs around the town. The first one is at the B.C. Tel office itself. One of the switchboard telephones isn't working properly.

"This is part of the third training course," he explained. "Phones that don't work, buttons that don't stay down, lights that don't come on and it's really a question of experience rather than training."

"As I get older I don't imagine I will look forward to the long winters or the pole climbing. But many different jobs are available within B.C. Tel, so I shall probably go back to school and study engineering or drafting and change my job within the company. But until then, I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing."



Citizen photos by Doug Weller

Part of the job involves climbing a pole to check the lines.

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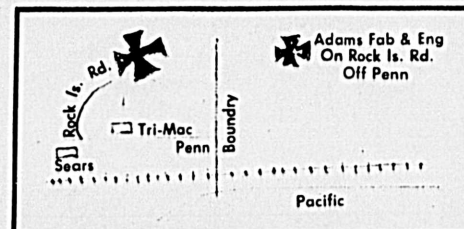
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